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OBSSESSIONS FROM ABROAD

SCENTS OF PLACE

You'll find the world's finest perfumes (and most abundant flower fields) in a place that's stuck in the past—centuries in the past. **By Liana Schaffner**



An abundance
of May roses in
Grasse, France



The terraced landscape of Grasse



Everyone in Grasse insists this soggy weather won't last, including the man who sells umbrellas. I wonder whether I should buy one. He shrugs and frowns in that distinctly French way, a gesture that could imply anything, and so really implies nothing. The weak drizzle strengthens into fog; rings of mist girdle steeples and medieval towers. I feel as though I've arrived at the top of a beanstalk, not on the French Riviera. But because I am in this supposedly sun-drenched region, a mere 30 minutes from Cannes, I pass on the umbrella and buy a slab of hand-milled soap instead. It has a pleasant, trustworthy weight. I try to distinguish its scent from the general atmosphere, which smells of rose, jasmine, and lavender. The invisible bouquet climbs narrow alleys and eases around corners, as pliant as shadow. This, at least, does last.

Grasse is the capital of the fragrance industry, a title it's maintained since the seventeenth century. The town's connection to scent is so solid that perfume takes tangible form here. There's the sprawling Musée International de la Parfumerie with its manicured botanical gardens, as well as famous distilleries, such as Fragonard, which is housed in a splendid villa. But stroll through Grasse's needle-eye passages and you'll stumble on smaller, more modest perfumeries, each selling its own brand of seduction. Pastel soaps, lacy sachets, and pink and amber perfume bottles brighten storefronts. Visually, the effect is as delectable as a patisserie—and visitors often confuse the two. One perfumery has a sign out front: "No ice cream. No sandwich. No soda in the shop."

Unlike its resort-town neighbors—Nice, Cannes, Monte Carlo, Antibes—Grasse lacks glamour. It doesn't have the flash of a yacht's prow, the clink of a high-stakes casino. The deficit of spas and five-star hotels means celebrities would never flock here for a film festival. Tourists (they're the ones sniffing the air) stroll at a meandering pace. There's no need to rush in a place where time stands still—or slowly unravels. The buildings have chipped ochre facades and crooked blue window shutters. Laundry lines zigzag



A pile of May roses harvested by Chanel for its new fragrance No. 5 L'Eau. Above: Examining the fields.

Time Is of the Essence

Grasse is surrounded by hectares and hectares of lavender and May rose—one of the most finicky perfume ingredients. The pale-pink flower blooms for only three weeks in late spring. Once it's picked, the extraction process must begin within two hours. Otherwise, the flower's fragrance molecules disperse into the air, and its scent is lost for good.



Below and near right:
Different ways of
exploring the flower
fields. Far right:
The fragrance itself.



The L'Eau Down

There are five versions of Chanel No. 5 (fitting, no?) that are bottled in Grasse. The newest, Chanel No. 5 L'Eau (out this month), is the lightest and brightest of them all.

What's new: "I wanted to tell the story of Chanel No. 5 in a more contemporary way," says perfumer Olivier Polge. The floral bouquet now has lucid green notes, a prominent slosh of citrus, and vibrant cedar to "leave an impression of freshness." L'Eau also contains rose, jasmine, ylang-ylang, and the aldehydes that first put No. 5 on the map.

Why now: After producing major hits for other brands, Polge has come "home" to Chanel, where his father was the head perfumer for 35 years. His clear vision and respect for tradition equal one exciting scent. "For me, fragrance connects the heart and the brain," he says.

overhead while cobblestone streets bend and curve, testing your equilibrium and your tendons. There's a plaintive irony here, disguised as charm. In the wide-open Place de l'Évêché, rowdy boys kick around a soccer ball with a scatter of rose petals at their feet. The great Cathédrale Notre-Dame-du-Puy, a solemn Romanesque structure, looms above the square. Near the fountain in the café-lined Place aux Aires, a truck arrives and unloads discarded flowers. Women rush over and gather exultant armfuls. I consider joining the melee but hold back, wary of sharp thorns and sharper elbows. When the crowd disperses, trampled leaves release a spiky, snapped-stem freshness. The fog lowers to street level, and everything it touches feels washed and renewed.

The next day, sunshine peeks valiantly through, and I set out for rural Grasse. I visit the Chanel flower fields, where the raw materials for the brand's scents, such as the May rose, are grown. The same family has cultivated this land for five generations; heritage is as abundant as the harvest. I meet with Olivier Polge, the house's perfumer, who is the son of its previous perfumer. Polge is preparing to launch his latest fragrance: a reinterpretation of Chanel No. 5, arguably the world's most iconic scent. The new formulation (Chanel No. 5 L'Eau) is free of nostalgia. It's a breath of air, a soft and dreamy mix of May rose, cedar, and citrus. The trail is vibrant, green, uplifting. I ask Polge how he managed to create something that is so fresh but not at all thin or vapid. "I'm guided by instinct, but these fields give the scent meaning," he says, indicating the rolling acres of pink roses behind us. "I can appreciate the ingredients, where they come from, who harvested them. That keeps me grounded. We have a saying in France: 'Always put the church in the center of the village.'"

And it occurs to me that this breed of newness is nothing new. It springs from something deep and eternal. Polge has sought to express this alchemy in perfume—and it's evident wherever sun follows rain.

